

# The NEWS LETTER

OF THE COLLEGE ENGLISH ASSOCIATION

L. II.

SCHENECTADY, N. Y., JANUARY, 1940

No. 1

## CEA Elects Officers, Adopts Constitution

One hundred ninety English teachers overcrowded the dining room at Arnaud's Restaurant in New Orleans the evening of December 23 and enjoyed the first annual banquet of the College English Association. Inevitable delays resulting from the fact that sixty more diners appeared than were expected. The time was spent in getting acquainted. The dinner program itself was informal, with Professor Cannon of Mississippi State as a guest and genial toastmaster introducing Dean De Vane of Yale University, who brought greetings from the Modern Language Association of which he is a director; Professor Emeritus McBride of Yale University who welcomed the Association to New Orleans. Due to the lateness of the hour further addresses were postponed until Friday morning and the first business meeting was called to order under the chairmanship of Professor Johnson of Union College. Mr. Johnson made a brief report from the treasurer and a brief explanation of the fashion in which the affairs of CEA have been financed up to the present moment. A little assistance from the grace of a fund in his keeping dated several years ago by the Carnegie Foundation for the Advancement of Teaching. This was applied to an inquiry into the effectiveness of composition teaching in American colleges, and experimentation in that field. The report of the treasurer indicated a balance when the books were closed in December of \$235.

### Our Constitution

The tentative draft of the constitution published in the "News Letter" was first in the order of business. At a suggestion from the floor, all provisions that were likely to arouse no controversy were presented as a single motion and adopted unanimously. Article 2 setting the aims of CEA, and Article 3 defining qualifications for membership were then taken up and vigorously discussed. It was decided to postpone the adoption of a statement of aims until more thought could be given to the matter by interested members. It was felt that this clause had a very great importance, involving as it does the justification for a new organization such as this. After discussion of the clause limiting membership, with a plea on behalf of teachers in junior colleges, and after argument in favor of a limited membership, it was voted to approve the clause as it stands in the tentative draft; since this clause provides for a membership committee to consider individual

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## THE REWARDS OF TEACHING

There were days when it went well in the classroom. I knew something done against darkness, I could tell That the twenty minds were one. There were other days when too much morning sun Filled the high windows, and springtime sky and trees Called all away, and none of us could go. Was it one of these? Is it any time that teachers know? Some of the thousand hours were quick with love I can tell you nothing of. There were also days when I brought to class A hurt that would not stay at home alone. With heart like a stone In a coat-pocket, I stood for an hour, and taught. There were days when half a thought Was all you got, and all I had to give. Now you come saying that as long as you may live You'll never forget. Something I said in class that helps you even yet. Why? When? What was I thinking then? I know it is the sort of thing to say. But of all my days for you, upon which day?

—John Holmes  
Tufts College.

## Stop-Press

I accept most gratefully the honor which the College English Association has thrust upon me and shall try to deserve it. Sorry that pressure of business, proofs of forthcoming book, and illness at home have prevented writing at length.

William C. De Vane

## From Our 1st V. P.

To the members of the CEA:

The news of my nomination to one of the vice-presidencies of the CEA came as a belated Christmas present and calls for a thank-you note. I appreciate the honor and here are my thanks.

I think it was because I am in Oregon that the nominating committee put me down for an office. Oregon thinks of itself as a pioneer state: its university was founded by the initiative and sacrifices of its pioneers—and the CEA is, in a sense, a pioneer organization.

The teaching of literature and composition has at its best always been highly individualistic—a teacher-pupil or teacher-student relationship determining content and methods. That is why there are so many textbooks in both subjects and why the life of most of them, good though they may be, is so short; and why some teachers prefer to use none. We college teachers of English have to a great extent been free from supervision and dictation as to what and how we shall teach: the more points of view and the more varied the personalities in an English department, the better. This may explain, too, why the CEA has been so long in coming.

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## Sphynxiana

Mr. Christopher Morley has expressed his sympathetic interest in CEA, and your editor wrote asking him for some communication to college teachers of literature or composition. He replied explaining why it was impossible for him to find time to write us. Your editor wrote again, pointing out that the time Mr. Morley had given to the task of explaining that he had no time might better have been spent in sending some word for publication, either stimulating, annoying, or profound. We publish the reply to that letter.

"You catch me bending. I think the purpose of the literature teacher is to catch the student bending. To catch him when he is flexible and open to bastinado."

Surely the trouble is that we are supposed to inoculate them with the most mature sensations before they have developed the necessary sensibilities. The evident conclusion is, what can we do to age them rapidly?

Why have English teachers concentrated on the figures carved on the outside of the Grecian Urn rather than on the potent draught for which the Urn was made?

I think if I had to put in one sentence my feeling about literature it is this: I get so extraordinarily a pleasure out of it, it would be selfish not to let somebody know. The only bad teachers are those who never felt that gorgeous and ridiculous ecstasy or who were too shy to admit it.

Now, — you, whether stimulating or annoying or profound, I am going back to work.

Christopher Morley."

(Deleted by censor  
University of Pennsylvania Library

Serials Division

## English: Tool, or Catalyst?

With each new issue of the *Journal of Engineering Education*, storm signals multiply. That the technical faculties should be concerned, and gravely so, over the "English" situation is of course nothing new. At length, however, the murky mass of surveys, laborious questionnaires, long-drawn-out discussions both with departments of English and among themselves, appears about to crystallize.

Three characteristic and divergent views are strongly held within one state-controlled western college. First comes the uncompromising statement of a prominent departmental head:

In the technical schools our prime object is to train in clear and precise thinking. With the increasing complexity of our field, four years is all too short; only through severe concentration of energies will the young graduate have attained to understanding of his technical journal. Granted, he will be better off with some knowledge of contemporary thought, some appreciation of literature. But these are his own affair; a good man cannot keep from contact with them. To subject a student of inferior home training to such subjects, which he simply loathes, is worse than waste of time. Both men will benefit from a course in technical writing, provided it is not given before the junior year, by which time the hatred of English carried over from high school will be forgotten in the desire to write a good report. Clear, vigorous expression is their sole requirement in English; if it inspires enthusiasm for this skill the course is an unqualified success.

Another department expresses a second representative view:

A large proportion of our graduates reach positions of responsibility and leadership; they require a broader cultural training, and must become able to say what they mean. Their curriculum should include psychology and public speaking, history and economics, literature, and even philosophy. Because in these subjects the introductory courses are usually planned for freshman who will continue in the field, and because of the limited number of available hours, the solution appears to be that adopted by such schools as the California Institute of Technology and the Massachusetts Institute of Technology—a liberalizing core curriculum extending throughout the full four years and effecting a combination of English and history. Properly conducted, this will lay a foundation for understanding of contemporary trends and will develop the habit of reading critically and widely, a necessity as defense against modern propaganda. The

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## COLLEGE ENGLISH ASSOCIATION Established 1939

### OFFICERS

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William Clyde DeVane, Yale  
**VICE-PRESIDENTS**  
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(term ends in Dec. of year named)  
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C. May Overton, South Dakota State (1941)  
Rev. Hugh McCarron, Georgetown (1941)  
Norman Foerster, U. of Iowa (1940)  
Frank P. Rand, Massachusetts State (1940)  
Herbert L. Creek, Purdue (1940)

## EDITORIAL

The "News Letter" of the College English Association is an informal publication issued approximately once a month for eight or nine months of the year, by authorization of the board of directors of the CEA. Its purpose is the furtherance of discussion and the exchange of ideas, suggestions, and items of news among the members of this Association, and it is distributed to them without charge. Because of requests from college librarians and from others not eligible for CEA membership who are interested in problems of college English teaching, the directors have authorized the acceptance of annual subscriptions at the rate of \$1.50, assuming no responsibility for the continuance of the "News Letter" in its present form beyond the present year.

Many requests have been received from non-members for back numbers, or for copies of a current issue. These requests generally cannot be filled. Members failing to receive the copies to which they are entitled should notify the editor promptly; and members who wish to have extra copies of a current issue for any special purpose should make the request in advance if possible, or immediately after publication.

The editor of the "News Letter" does not solicit contributions from non-members of the CEA, and is not in a position to consider manuscript submitted even by members if the length exceeds 1,000 words, and half as long would be twice as welcome.

Publication is vexation and printing drives us mad; nevertheless our members continue to yearn for some periodical medium for the wider dissemination of addresses and other learned articles. The very nature of the NEWS LETTER calls for brevity. The concentrated essence of ideas is what it feeds upon, and it holds out small comfort to the wandering dissertation or thesis which has been seeking some rotary-press whereon to rest its weary bones. Yet it is possible that CEA might find a way to render even that service by developing the suggestion offered us by John Erskine.

Why not a series of eight or ten or a dozen monographs published

in leaflet form throughout the year? One can visualize an editorial committee of three or four members whose task it would be to select the best of submitted papers, avoiding the dry-as-dust variety,—perhaps even suggesting desirable subject-matter to members notable for special knowledge or abilities. These monographs published in a modest but attractive uniform style, and numbered consecutively, could be priced at ten or fifteen cents per copy, and orders for them could be filled at any time. Some members or some libraries might even wish to subscribe for the set by payment in advance. If there were a deficit at the end of the year in the cost of publication, that would be smaller than the deficit for a standard-sized magazine underwritten by CEA and no member need purchase more of these scholarly articles than he cared to read; which is certainly not the case when he subscribes for the

Monthly, or the Quarterly,—but let us name no names and avoid lese majeste!

Enrolled members of CEA and those wishing to enroll will help to hasten effective organization by sending promptly their dues for 1940 (\$2.00) to Wm. R. Richardson, Treas., College of William and Mary, Williamsburg, Va.

Copies of the February "News Letter" and all ensuing issues will be mailed to members and subscribers only. Please see that your dues are paid and your address correctly recorded.

I have pretty nearly given up trying to define "good writing," for it seems to me, after a somewhat extended attempt to learn, that I don't know much about it. A large part of the poor writing I see—and, O Lord, much that I saw during the years when I sat in an editorial office—is due to the fact that the writer has nothing to say. He has really nothing to say out of his own life, his own individuality, his own thought, his own passion. He is trying to give us something, or sell us something, that he has himself had out of books or magazines or newspapers. As a reader I can stand poor mechanics of expression if I am really getting something; I can be happy if the words are also correctly spelled, and the infinitives are on bowing terms.

Ray Stannard Baker.

No college can train a student to be a writer merely by dragging him into a classroom for a few hours every week. The so-called student must do a lot of reading on the side and he must read something besides "Ballyhoo," "College Humor" and "True Stories." He should read Robert Louis Stevenson, Cardinal Newman, Abraham Lincoln, Walter Pater, Addison, and even Macaulay and Mencken. . . . The first thing a young writer needs to learn is that literature is not scroll work. He must avoid reading trash and associate with a few masters of English and he should persistently attempt to express himself on paper.

—Part of a letter from George Ade.

## Contemporary Lit. Again Style

My dear Editor:

What, no courses in contemporary literature? The material is still too untested for satisfactory teaching? Most teachers are not sufficiently in the atmosphere of the writing world to interpret and discriminate in any definite way? Boys must be introduced to the English classics? Young people should discover for themselves the work of living authors?

Nonsense, Dr. Canby and Miss Cather. You are like the reporter in jail who rattled the bars and shouted "They can't put me in here!" Contemporary literature is taught, successfully, every semester. I take up your arguments seriatim but in reverse order.

4. Young people can no more appreciate contemporary books than old books. They must be taught to appreciate them. I cannot prove this on paper; I merely appeal to the experience of teachers. Catch a garden variety American boy and let him appreciate Thomas Mann by himself.

3. Of course boys must be introduced to the English classics, and other classics as well. I will join any group that will use the method of President Hutchins and of St. John's College: four concentrated years of classics of all sorts, contemporary books to come only at the end of the fourth year. Failing that, we must teach contemporary books in order to interest our students in any books at all.

2. I doubt it.

1. Some books are classics the moment they drop from the press. What is a classic? I don't know, but I know that my grandchildren will read, willingly or unwillingly, a few books written since 1920 just as they will read Hamlet, Henry Esmond, St. Agnes' Eve, Widen, and for the same reasons. I name a few taken from American literature only. Arrowsmith. The Green Pastures. Giants in the Earth. Wine from These Grapes. The Grapes of Wrath. And finally, Miss Cather, A Lost Lady.

Herbert E. Childs  
Oregon State College

I have a very different conception from yours of the word style. I cannot think that it has anything to do with good manners but is simply a more obscure word for the qualities of pure individuality. There are many magnificent styles of the reverse of chesterfieldian. The need, after all, for clear writing is clear thinking. It is necessary before putting down conceptions or facts to be more or less completely aware of them. Clear writing, then, is simply the art of employing as exactly as possible the lettered formulae for the transmission of thought. This, it seems to me, would be based upon a sufficient knowledge of the meanings of words, of sentences and paragraphs, according to the simplest and best English usages and traditions. I do not see any connection at all between this and the processes of genius, since genius is not a question of clarity at all. The principle trouble with the young Americans, you speak of is a total inability to think in any admirable combination of independence and intelligence. In addition to this—a fact bearing directly on clarity of expression—their fundamental values for the most part are superficially material and wrong. What they think has no importance and so it can hardly matter how they put it down on paper. These young people may be much better than all this in school and college; but certainly scholastic influence seems to be helpless against the massed stupidities, the intellectual blindness or cowardice, the mental laziness, they later exhibit.

All this, I am afraid, is too general to be of any particular use for you. I wish I could be more helpful, since I am enormously interested in your question and in all the people it concerns. I can only end by saying what you already know—the question of clarity is inseparable from simplicity and honesty; given the ability to think at all I cannot feel that the rest is impossible to teach.

Joseph Hergeshelm

"University of Illinois" wants to know if we know the parody of Wordsworth's "Two Voices Are There." Yes; here it is:

### TO WORDSWORTH

Two voices are there; one is of the deep;

It learns the stormcloud's thunderous melody—

Now roars, now murmurs with the changing sea,  
Now bird-like pipes, now closes soft in sleep—

And one is of an old, half-witted sheep;—

Which bleats articulate monotony;

And indicates that two and one are three,—

The grass is green, lakes damp and mountains steep.

And Wordsworth, both are thine! at certain times

Forth from the heart of thy melodious rhymes

The form and pressure of high thoughts will burst!

At other times, Good Lord! I'd rather be

Quite unacquainted with by A B C

Than write such awful twaddle as thy worst.

—J. K. S.



## CEA Elects Officers,

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applications of others than those definitely specified; and since the Association has full power to change such a provision after one year of experimentation.

### Officers

With a constitution in force the members then proceeded to election of officers. A motion was carried that the position of executive secretary remain unfilled until the directors had an opportunity to search for the right incumbent. Since the duties of this position call for large expenditure of time and effort, it is necessary to discover someone able and willing to do such work without salary, and with a minimum of expense in this first year.

The following officers were elected: President, William Clyde De Vane, Yale U.; Vice-presidents, Mary H. Perkins, U. of Oregon; Frederick H. Hard, Tulane U.; Treasurer, William R. Richardson, C. of William and Mary; Secretary pro tem, Burges Johnson, Union College; Directors for 3 years: Robert M. Gay, Simmons College; Edith Mirrielees, Stanford U.; Burges Johnson, Union College; Directors for 2 years: Clifford P. Lyons, U. of Florida; C. May Overton, So. Dakota State College; Rev. Hugh McCarron, Georgetown U.; Directors for 1 year: Norman Foerster, U. of Iowa; Frank P. Rand, Mass. State College; Herbert L. Creek, Purdue U.

### Dues

The discussion of annual dues was prolonged because of the proposal to encourage sectional organizations by collecting dues for the national association large enough to provide for both; and then rebating to each local group, as soon as formed, its share of the dues collected from its own members. Several arguments were offered in favor of this; but it was urged in opposition that local groups might differ in their views as to local dues, some wanting one dollar per member, others fifty cents, and others no dues at all, but fees from those attending local meetings to cover costs of each meeting.

The secretary in response to questioning estimated that even with the present national membership, dues of two dollars could be made to cover eight issues of a News Letter of the present size, with its mailing cost, and a modest expenditure for postage and part-time stenographic help. At least such a tax could be tried out, and a report sent out to the members in June. It was then voted unanimously to set the dues at \$2.00.

The chairman read an open letter from the retiring president pro tem, Dr. Robert Gay, (extracts appear elsewhere in this issue) and then announced an adjourned meeting in the convention hall, St. Charles Hotel at 9 A. M. Friday.

Adjourned Meeting 9 a. m., Dec. 29  
Professor Lyons in the Chair

Following was the order of business: a greeting from and to our new president, William DeVane; address by John M. McBryde, "Reflections of an Ex-English Teacher"; address by Cleanth Brooks,

"The CEA as I See It"; paper by Douglas Eement, "Creating a Writer's Laboratory", followed by discussion; paper by Harlan W. Hamilton, U. of Akron, "Defining a Standard of Literacy", with discussion led by Robert Tyson Fitzhugh, U. of Maryland; paper by John Crowe Ransom, Kenyon College, "The Teaching of Criticism". President DeVane formally accepted office and promised that the CEA would be an active organization throughout the coming year. He declared the meeting adjourned.

The several papers aroused great interest which survived a shift from one room to another to meet the prior claims of the older MLA program. Discussions were vigorous. The "Writers' Laboratory" discussion even required an adjourned meeting of its own in the main lobby of the hotel after lunch.

Professor McBryde's reminiscences were not only entertaining but rich in the philosophy of good teaching and the humanizing of classroom routine. Professor Brooks revealed the charm of style that one might expect of the editor of the "Southern Review", and at the same time intensified the conviction that our new organization has an important task to accomplish in defining the teaching of literature and composition. Professor Ransom presented a scholarly discussion of criticism in the classroom applied especially to poetry. Professors Hamilton and Fitzhugh divided the time devoted to their topic and drew the audience into a thoroughly practical discussion.

There was a general expression of regret that our papers could not be presented in some fashion to the wider membership of CEA.

## Retiring President's Message

When the present College English Association was first projected we had, I think, only a very vague idea of what we were advocating. As I remember our correspondence at the time, our motives were a compound of irritation over our experiences at the great conventions, impatience with the inertia that kept college teachers of English from recognizing their corporate power and importance, and a somewhat hazy conception of what college English is, as compared with high-school and university English.

After a year of organization, however, we can look back upon a rapidly growing membership, the publication of three issues of the News Letter, the founding, in New England, of our first local section, and a numerous correspondence which indicates a national interest in our Association. Moreover (and perhaps I should whisper this) one seems to detect a prevalent searching of soul in the already existing language associations. I think that if we voted to disband today, we should not have existed in vain.

But we can also look forward to our second year, under duly elected officers and directors and a properly ratified constitution. We can hope for a continuation of what has already begun: progressive clarification of our aims and pur-

poses, and—most important of all—the emergence of a new community of spirit in the profession. The articles and letters in the News Letter make quite clear that there is such a thing as college English, and they have already suggested many fruitful subjects for discussion. The meeting of the New England Section indicated that programs devoted to important topics authoritatively presented will attract college teachers, and appeared to prove that the growth of the national association will be most effectively fostered by the formation of such local sections.

Since from the beginning the establishment of a C. E. A. magazine has been constantly discussed, I wish to take the opportunity to express my conviction that we have discovered the best method of doing this. The News Letter is a modest publication in appearance, but it has already proved remarkably influential in reality. The amount of correspondence it has elicited is really startling; and as every editor knows there is no better measure of magazine success than that. But the special value of the News Letter is that it permits us to discover, without crippling expense, what interests our members and what form a journal should take in the future. . . . The latest issue is twice as large as the earlier one; and if an increasing membership so desires, later issues can be still larger, so as to admit the inclusion of departments, reports, and more or longer articles.

A matter that needs careful consideration is the relationship of local sections to the parent organization. One thing to be avoided is, I think, the duplication of dues. A plan already proposed—though not yet adopted—here in New England is to have no local dues at all, but to charge a small registration fee for attendance at meetings. The fund so obtained will, we hope, be sufficient to pay the expense of secretary and meetings, and members can join the national C. E. A. directly, without being subject to a double taxation.

Our relations with the Modern Language Association and the National Council also need consideration. There seems no reason why these may not be mutually cordial. A great many of our members already belong to one or both of the older organizations and will continue to do so. But I must register my conviction that the successful future of the CEA lies in avoiding alliances. There are over a thousand teachers of college English in New England alone; there are enough in the entire country to form a great and useful organization. . . . I have little hope that our peculiar aims, purposes, and problems will ever receive adequate consideration at any convention at which we form only a small section of an immensely larger whole.

There are those who deplore the formation of a separate association of college teachers, on the ground that our interests can never be safely separated from those of the high-school and university. This argument, however, seems more specious than real. There is no reason why an organization such as ours should ignore high-school

and university relations and connections; indeed, one of our major purposes should be to ascertain what these are, to clarify them, and to show wherein the problems of the college impinge upon and overlap those of the lower and upper schools.

Occasional derisive or satirical remarks have come to me to the effect that our association is in danger of becoming an esthetic or dilettante organization, concerned with Literature with a capital L, on the one hand, or with Teaching with a capital T, on the other. Whether it ever becomes this, lies with us. But there is no reason why it ever should. There is also such a thing as Research with a capital R and Education with a capital E; but we must charitably assume that other associations carefully eschew these. There is really a great field for us to work in, without becoming emasculated. . . . And working in it has never precluded our being interested in scholarship and research or in secondary education. . . .

It is all the more important that we shall formulate our purposes and procedures now, because many of the so-called reforms in college originate with educational experts who formed their theories in dealing with adolescents. The criticism of college teaching today is not coming from the universities but from the schools of education. Such criticism may be sound; but it is very important that we should be prepared to meet it—whether by acceptance or by opposition.

In closing I wish to express my gratitude to the many members who have helped us during this first critical year and especially to those who have made this convention possible. I must also particularly thank Dr. Staunton and the members of the Nominating Committee for undertaking and concluding a difficult task.

Robert M. Gay

December 18, 1939

## From Our 1st V. P.

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The pioneers, scattered on their various homesteads, were also individualists but they later found it desirable to organize. The comparison must not be pushed too far, because the CEA is not for governing purposes or for protection against the aborigines (although some of the communications in the News Letter seem to hint at this possibility); but there were social as well as political and military gatherings, where neighbors met to exchange recipes and ideas. And it was undoubtedly at these meetings that theories took shape and policies were determined that influenced the life of the community.

The early years of any organization are very important, and success depends upon the active interest of each member. Every teacher of English can draw upon experience for contributions to our common store. The CEA welcomes those contributions.

MARY H. PERKINS  
Professor of English  
University of Oregon

## To Any Psychologist

### AN OPEN LETTER

My dear Sir:

Ever since the depression and the cutting down of public school expenditure, there has been a noticeable slump in the ability of college freshmen to write well. They are coming now from overcrowded classes that have been shortened also as to time. Practice in writing calls for individual attention from the teacher and these high school graduates of today have not received it. They are notably weak in mechanics of writing; and colleges are facing the need, as never before, to train them in good usage, even in spelling, to make up for high school deficiencies.

It is the question of spelling that I am taking to you. Trivial as the subject may seem, yet it is as harassing as a mosquito; and you will find that boys are being dismissed from colleges here and there because spelling alone has kept them from passing freshman English. I have lately stood sponsor for two young men in this college who were dismissed from other institutions of high repute solely because of continuing failure in English and that failure due beyond question entirely to spelling. Investigation indicated that they stood well in other courses. They proved themselves here to be excellent students and worth salvaging.

Among college English teachers at the undergraduate level you will find a range of opinion all the way from those who think that correct spelling is a trivial consideration, wholly superficial and unimportant in this day of stenographers and secretarial aid; to those who consider a correctly spelled letter the mark of an educated man and would dismiss from college those who cannot write one.

I am not seeking to debate any such question with a psychologist any more than with any other educated citizen, but I should like to ask the psychologist whether an inability to spell correctly may not be due to several very different causes; and whether there may not be some way for us English teachers to classify our bad spellers, and penalize only those who deserve penalization.

I assume that some students do not spell correctly because they have been indolent and indifferent and do not consider the matter important enough to bother about. Focusing attention upon the matter would cure them if they could be persuaded to do so. Such students obviously need the pressures and the disciplines of school-room and teacher supervision. But what of the young man who has proved himself to be an eager student, successful in college studies and intellectually alert; and also aware of his spelling deficiency and hopeless about it? Frankly, it is my own impulse in such cases to place little importance upon spelling; but the complaints come from other departments of study—the psychologist, for instance, tells me that he cannot give the young man a good mark because his spelling is atrocious. I am told, in answer to questions, that he proves him-

self acquainted with his subject and otherwise satisfactory; but, says the teacher, we cannot send a young man out into the world with our degree upon him when his spelling is going to suggest that he is uneducated.

So, as chairman of the English department in a college of high standards, I have asked that difficult cases be sent to me; and I am coming to the opinion that there are at least three definite types among them, and if I am right, each type demands a very different treatment.

I do not want to lengthen this letter by the spreading out of data that I have accumulated to prove my point. It is all available to any psychologist or group of psychologists who would be interested in helping us to understand this problem a little better. But let me point the direction toward which my own observations lead. With some students some sort of immaturity enters in. The weakness cures itself, regardless of teaching or lack of teaching, as the young man gains in certain mental attainments that come with age. I should like to know what these are. I am familiar with one or two prompt answers from psychologists, and distrust them!

There is a second type whose misspellings follow certain patterns. I can cite the case of a brilliant student, especially interested in economics and government, who spells the word "property" *propertiy* every time he writes it, and he uses the word a dozen times. Yet he pronounces it correctly. Whatever caused this particular error in his case is the cause of a whole classification of misspellings.

I have merely hinted at my problem. It is my guess that a careful study would lead the psychologists to conclude that there are three outstanding causes for weakness in spelling, not counting indolence and indifference. It is quite possible that with a better understanding of these background causes, freshmen English teachers, and even the high school English teachers with their still larger problem, could work less injustice to sincere young students and accomplish better results with greater economy of time and effort. It is also possible that such researches have been made; but if they have, I am afraid they have stayed too close to the laboratory or have not been interpreted in such a fashion as to convince the average English teacher.

Can you be of service to us?

Sincerely yours,  
Perplexed Professor.

"Who so shall telle a tale after a man,  
He mooste reherse, as neighes ever he can,  
Everich word, if it be in his charge,  
All speke he never so rudely and so large;  
Or elles he mooste tellen his tale untrewre,  
Or feinen thinges, or finden wordes enewe."

Canterbury Tales: Prologue.

## English: Tool, or Catalyst?

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engineering faculty can provide incentive and example, but with its wealth of subject matter the English department has here distinctly the advantage.

A third view is presented, in grim silence, by another department, which, eliminating freshman composition, subjects its students to only a brief three quarter-hours. As the basis for accrediting stands at present, if it dropped those few hours it would fail of recognition; yet, unless the instruction in English is regarded as vital, can the present requirement hope to be maintained? Already representatives of Eastern schools have declared openly that mathematics, social science, and technical writing can best be taught by the engineering instructors themselves, who know well the needs of their students. As only one who has taught in an engineering college must admit, they do hold the trump card—their students' eager, unflagging cooperation. This the English instructors may gain only through their approval.

Is English, then, to become a more efficient service course to engineering? Today, few English instructors know the essentials of a good engineering report. Is English to prove the best medium for bringing superior students (note recent findings as to their intelligence!) into contact with their racial heritage? The instructor himself, trained in a specific field, may lack the breadth essential for this ambitious goal. Or is the English of the college of engineering to follow in the steps of that extinct bird, the dodo?

Possibly the time is not yet past ripe for more convincing explanation on the part of English faculties as to the unique values to be gained through literature.

A. V. Hall

Univ. of Washington.

\*Union College has an interesting course, summarized by Prof. Burgess Johnson: "The engineering faculty concedes to us what we are pleased to call a 'band of liberalizing studies' running through the four years of engineering. This means one course per year: freshman year, English; senior year, an intensive course in economics. Sophomore and junior years comprise one course, two years in length, provided by instructors from the English and the social studies faculties. It is called 'cultural background of modern life,' and the student gets a pretty severe dose of ancient history, modern history, political science, and social science, with the literature arising out of those fields; two instructors alternating at 6-weeks intervals.

## Stop-Press

I shall be glad to serve another year as treasurer of the C. E. A. The new organization meets a widely felt want: the chance to exchange, at meetings and in a periodical, ideas on our aims as teachers of college English. Prompt payment of the annual dues of \$2.00 by the regular members when, in the near future, they receive their bills would help the association make effective plans for the year 1940. We should welcome any who approve of the work of the association but who have not yet joined.

W. R. Richardson

## Association Style Book

The instructor of freshman English composition uses rules and symbols as tools. He learns his craft using one set of tools, developing a high degree of proficiency in their use, only to find that a change to some other text robs him of his skill by compelling him to use unfamiliar tools. Such a loss of energy and efficiency might be checked.

We cannot hope that textbook writers will voluntarily stop vying with each other in compiling new sets of rules and symbols which they vainly hope will win general adoption. The solution to the problem may be found in the establishment, by the National Council of Teachers of English or the newly organized College English Association, of a committee, made up of textbook writers representing all schools of thought, who would be obliged to compose their differences and present a clear-cut and rational "style book" recommended for adoption by publishers of all rhetoric and composition textbooks.

Some textbook compilers would undoubtedly protest their loss of the privilege of tinkering with rules and symbols systems, but would eventually employ their ingenuity and individuality to better advantage in making a universally accepted system clear to students. There would be no more hindrance to the publication of new and better texts in English composition than now exists in the fields of chemistry or mathematics. Nor would the establishment of uniform rules arrest natural development of expression and style. The committee, having drawn up a style book, would continue to function as a high court of appeals and would, at periodic intervals, perhaps every five years, make such additions or corrections in the style book as might be deemed advisable in view of the practice of the best writers and the judgment of authorities.

The task of the style book committee would be Herculean and might take years to accomplish. Even so, its labor would be in the interest of all, and would be small in comparison with the sum total of effort now expended by individual instructors and writers trying to chart their course by means of a dozen shifting compasses. The use of a truly universal style book would lighten immeasurably the drudgery of correcting themes, and would consequently improve the caliber of teachers and of teaching.

Chas. W. Roberts  
University of Illinois

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## Why Not Some Old English?

People still do, in this democracy ours, pretty much what they want to do. And people want to do, for the most part, what the rest are doing. I have often tried to picture the situation if suddenly, through subtle shuffling of students' humours and complexions, Old English should become the course that all should take. Picture the *Proverbs of King Alfred* sparking in new adaptations among the campus wits; the letter thorn finding a permanent place in the undergraduate written report; and the dual pronouns working overtime in conversations of sweet nothingness. A girl not in 'the know' might say, "I think you're perfectly silly". He (any "he" up to the newest tricks) would answer, "Thanks for calling me happy". She, somewhat taken aback, might retort, "Aw, quit your teasing". But again the savant, "Say, tidbit, if I were actually 'teasing' you I'd be committing murder. Go take some Old English and learn how to talk!"

The course in Old English is open to all and required of none. No one takes it unless he wants to. Many elect it and change their minds upon discovering that Sir Walter Scott's spelling of the past tense of the verb 'sit' with a final 'e' is really not Old English at all. Well do I remember a few years ago the gangling youth from the School of Physical Education and Athletics towering far above little me and fairly shouting down my mild inquiries with, "This is English, isn't it? I have to take English, and this fits my schedule!"

The ones who have stuck it out, however, have been lovable. There were the two girls from New Jersey who were majoring in Chemistry. They had had French, German, Latin, and Italian, and they wanted Old English as a new adventure. They found it an enjoyable one. And the Christmas card one of them sent me, done in perfect Anglo-Saxon script, was to me an adventure in satisfaction. There was the mathematician who studied his declensions by making charts of the frequency of occurrence of certain endings in the paradigms. There was the Lithuanian prelegal student who delighted in matching inflexional endings and engaging in wild-cat comparative conjectures. He was learning and so was I. And there was the German world war veteran, a member of the Prussian Guard, economist, philologist, antiquarian, and connoisseur of art. Years of convalescence had permitted him to read nearly everything that was readable. But it was a triumph for him when he wrote to his former teacher in Germany, "I can now read Old English".

And yet never (well, hardly ever) does one come in who has the ultimate intention of teaching the English language to the youth of our land. Language, they say, is an instrument for modern needs. To use a sharp axe one does not need the whole history of axe making. So, perhaps not. But I fear that

that sharp axe of efficiency is going to cut off a lot of Johnnie's pertinent and intelligent questions. Who put the w in 'answer'? Why do we say 'English' and spell it 'English'? Why do 'so' and 'to' have different pronunciations? Why do we prefer dozens to tens in the market? Why do we say 'sing-sang' and not 'bring-brang'? Why do we say 'brethren' sometimes and at other times 'brothers'? Why is the feminine of 'fox' 'vixen'? Efficiency might possibly tell Johnnie it should be 'she fox'. Efficiency might also tell Johnnie, "I did not make the English language. Learn it as you find it."

Matthew Arnold several years ago made a nice distinction between doing without knowing why and seeing things as they really are. The one is action through blind obedience; the other a knowing and a becoming. The one represents a culture which we have come to dislike; the other a culture of which, in spite of its imperfection, we are proud. Johnnie might have some cause for complaint.

—D. S. MEAD  
Pennsylvania State College

## Contemporary "Lit"? Yes!

With all due respect to their eminence as critics and writers, I think that Miss Cather and Mr. Canby do not understand or appreciate the place of contemporary literature in college English. So far as I know, no teacher of contemporary poetry, let us say, would presume that he is teaching anything but "untested" material. That is, as a matter of fact, its chief virtue as literary material; it demands that the teacher study with his students, confront the problem in reading that confronts them, and read with them for discovery and understanding in an uncharted wilderness. It stimulates a good teacher to have the clichés of centuries of annotation and comment, which often do more to befuddle than to enlighten, partly or entirely wanting. He cannot rely on the criticisms of Coleridge or Arnold to solve the problems of interpreting the verses in the latest issue of *Poetry*, *A Magazine of Verse*. On the other hand, he does not have to undo the often misleading comment, let us say, of a Mary Shelley on the works of her husband. He has to interpret a work of art that must stand or fall for him simply in terms of reading it, and that must be read as all poetry should be read, for what can be got out of its own words.

The value of "untested" literature as teaching material is not as generally recognized as it should be. If I may be pardoned a personal reference, I may mention the use that I have made in poetry classes of current issues of *Poetry*, or some other magazine of verse. Each student subscribes to the magazine and as soon as the first issue comes to him, he reads it with the understanding that he is to interpret, explain, and evaluate in class the various pieces as he understands them. The challenge to reading is

in many ways greater than that of "tested" materials, because the student knows that he is less at a disadvantage in comparison with his teacher than in the study of Milton, whom his teacher has studied and taught for years, and because he does not have that "too sacred to touch" attitude with which he approaches a classic. In some instances he has the advantage of his teacher in that he is more in the swim of modern life. I recall distinctly a young man who had never distinguished himself in literary interpretation, but who gave the class and myself the clues to an understanding of Peter DeVries's "Love Song" in the March (1939) issue of *Poetry*. He read it as a modern youth who knew the problems of modern life, the sights and sounds of a large city, the terrific emotional pressures of the age, and all that no amount of literary scholarship could have given him. His sympathetic feeling for metaphor and rhythm was used to excellent critical effect, where my own had been somewhat lacking. He has become a confirmed reader of current magazine verse and a far more intelligent and critical student of poetry in other classes which deal with "tested" poetry.

I dare to suggest that even some of our brilliant scholars would find themselves hard pressed occasionally in keeping up with the keen perception of modern students in the reading of modern poetry and that they might incidentally learn something themselves, something more valuable to their teaching of literature than the perusal of musty notes compiled a decade ago and never since revised.

It is my conviction that teaching a little strictly contemporary literature will provide excellent suggestions of how to teach the "tested" literature of the past. Even Shakespeare can best be taught as a contemporary who writes for the modern student. By this I do not mean to disparage scholarship or the need for understanding Shakespeare's milieu, but rather to emphasize something I am afraid too many teachers forget; namely, that poetry has always been written to be read, and not to be discussed and lectured about as a relic of the past.

The teacher has an important job in "exposing his students to the classics," to use Miss Cather's phrase, but from what I know of teachers I doubt that a classic is in their hands any safer as teaching material than is an "untested" poem. The more important job of the teacher is to teach students to read, and for this, contemporary poetry has some distinct advantages. How literary scholarship has conspicuously failed to make intelligent readers of college students is illustrated in the reading habits of the average college graduate, who seldom buys a book and rarely enters a public library.

As to Miss Cather's point that students should be "allowed to discover for themselves what they like," I entirely agree; but I do not see how the teacher's ignoring contemporary literature would be conducive to the student's discovery

of what he likes. To my mind any teacher worth his salt would consider it his duty to encourage his students, not only in discovering, but in claiming the rights of discovery. The spirit if not the magnificent language, of Keat's "On First Looking into Chapman's Homer" is certainly not to be denied to the student who is learning to read literature and wanting to express the enthusiasm of his experience. It has been my experience that these enthusiasms and desires for expression have been less circumscribed in the study of contemporary literatures than in the study of the classics, although I have constantly tried to encourage them in the study of both. I wonder what the experience of other teachers has been in this matter? It is my feeling that, even when one tries to avoid it, the teaching of "tested" material has too much indoctrination of the "right" things and too little discovery of "the realms of gold." We have, as Aristotle said of the Sophists, "suppose that they (teachers) trained people by imparting to them not the art but its products."

If contemporary literature is taught

"with love far-brought  
From out the storied Past,  
and used  
Within the Present, but transfused  
Thro' future time by power of  
thought"

then it can be one of the most valuable esthetic experiences in the life of the college student, and one just as, or more, likely to lead him to read after college than the study of Jane Austin or John Milton.

Roy P. Basler  
State Teachers College  
Florence, Alabama.

Smith

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## Hints From New England

The papers presented at the meeting of the College English Association were outlined for the December "News Letter," and then omitted for lack of space. They suggest the contribution that the association may make to the teaching of English, and offer evidence, too, that there is a rich middle ground between the minutiae of research on the one side and the technicalities of education on the other.

Professor Theodore Morrison described the course in English A at Harvard and then commented on the nature and function of freshman English courses in general. He believes that such courses are primarily tool courses, and that in them students should be taught to read understandingly and to write correctly. Teachers should relate the theme assignments to other courses and should not hesitate to accept and to criticize themes on subjects of which the instructor has no special knowledge. The fact that such courses are tool courses should not, however, rule out the consideration of aesthetic and human values, for sensitivity is also a form of knowledge.

Professor Frederick A. Pottle traced the development of Boswell's "Life of Johnson," its genesis in hasty jottings, its fuller expansion in journals, and its final development into the Life. Boswell's greatness as a biographer he attributes to Boswell's method of gathering and organizing material and to the personal traits which enabled him to "snare experience"—his exceptional memory, his extraordinary zest for living, his power of apprehending experience objectively and of recording it without distortion.

Professor George K. Anderson persuasively stated his belief that Old English literature as literature receives insufficient attention, that emphasis on linguistic study has led to the undue subordination and even to the ignoring of other and equally fruitful avenues of approach. He read passages in translation to demonstrate that Old English literature offers substance of interest to the psychological critic, to the aesthetic critic, to the student of literary origins, to the student of history, and to the student of life and manners.

Professor Agnes F. Perkins gave reasons for her conviction that a major in rhetoric is feasible. She answered some of the objections generally raised against majoring in composition and discussed the advantages that such a course of study has offered to students at Wellesley. She spoke particularly of the advisability of allowing students to undertake long compositions, even novels.

Professor Cudworth Flint advocated the semantic approach to literature. In times such as ours it is necessary, he believes, that students as students and as future voters bring their full powers of comprehension to bear on their reading. Words must be interpreted in their context, and the dictionary frequently is not an adequate aid. Readers should proceed from a survey of the whole of a piece of writ-

ing to an analysis of its parts. Despite a certain forbidding abstruseness, the writings of Professor I. A. Richards are of definite value to teachers of English.

Newman B. Birk  
Tufts College.

## Perspective

If we are to educate rather than train for democracy the first essential to wisdom is perspective. Perspective is attained by broadening and lengthening experience far beyond the boundaries, either in time or space, of the life span of an individual. It must, therefore, be achieved through vicarious experience; by imaginative processes the experiences of other people who lived before our time, and people in far regions, must be assimilated into our own lives, until they possess the vividness, the completeness, the reality of our own memories—and both must be reflected upon until they are formed by the individual mind into coherent and significant patterns.

If that is the method and the objective, it follows inescapably that remoteness in time and space has no adverse effect upon the relevance of knowledge. The thinking of Plato and Aristotle regarding democracy is as real, as valid, as informing as ever it was; and mere nearness in time does not make the views of lesser men more important. . . .

It is perfectly clear, however, that perspective has not been a popular educational objective during the last two decades. The emphasis has been upon knowledge of today, something immediately useful. The social studies have been crowded with the data of the current scene, and successive editions of textbooks have tumbled over each other in hot pursuit of events. Ancient history has fallen from favor, and more and more emphasis has been put upon current history, especially American history. Schools have stressed those events in "social" and "economic" history with a direct and obvious bearing upon the issues now before the public. But the material is out of focus. The simple fact is that the distant past is no more dead to youth than the recent past. If an event occurred before his memory began, distance in time need not affect reality. Caesar is no more dead than Woodrow Wilson; good teaching can make one life as real as the other. But there is one vital difference: the teacher can indicate the ultimate outcomes of the policies of Caesar, but no one can yet fully assess the fruits of Wilson's activities.

Henry M. Wriston, President of Brown Univ., sends us this excerpt from an address on "Education for the Defense of Democracy."

"For out of the old fieldes, as men saithe,  
Cometh all this new corne fro yere to yere;  
And out of old booke, in good faith,  
Cometh all this new science that men lere."  
"Troilus and Cressida."

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